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FRANKLIN'S CEREMONIAL COAT

BY

RICHARD MEADE BACHE.

*Reprinted from The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography,
January, 1900.*



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FRANKLIN'S CEREMONIAL COAT.

Probably no case of dress, not even that of Napoleon's daily renewed small-clothes, nor of Prince Esterhazy's diamond-besprent diplomatic coat, has received more frequent mention than that as to whether or not Dr. Franklin wore a certain dress on two certain formal occasions, and if he did, whether or not the dress was worn on the second occasion with any significance beyond ceremonial intention. Immediately after the treaty of peace with Great Britain the charge was rife that, at its signing, Franklin had worn the dress in exultation over the British failure to subjugate the Colonies. Even down to the present time the majority of persons who know anything about the matter, unaware that another dress was worn on that occasion, believe the dress in question to have been then worn, and with the express purpose of signalizing British defeat.

The point is, to say the least, interesting, because it also incidentally involves another question, that as to whether or not Franklin wore the dress in defiance at the signing of the treaty of alliance between the United States and France. It is, moreover, too important a point, both biographically and historically, to have remained unsettled to the present day, now over a hundred years. The fact is that those of opposing beliefs have unwittingly had in mind a different occasion for the second one. Obviously, discussion of the question as to whether or not there was significance in wearing a certain dress on the second of two related occasions could reach no sane conclusion if views differed as to what was the second one on which it was worn.

The two occasions which will be here demonstrated to have been actual ones are, first, that on which Franklin was attacked in most unseemly fashion before King George the

Third's Privy Council, on January 29, 1774, by the King's Solicitor-General, Mr. Wedderburn, for having transmitted to America, for the information of his patriot friends in Boston, what are known to the history of the times as the "Hutchinson Letters;" and, second, the occasion on which he, jointly with his fellow-commissioners of the United States, signed at Paris the treaties of commerce and alliance, on February 6, 1778, between the United States and France. The celebrated Dr. Joseph Priestley, the well-known Dr. Edward Bancroft, the renowned orator Edmund Burke, and many other distinguished men were present at the proceedings before the Privy Council. Dr. Priestley says, in the course of his account of them,—

"When he [Franklin] attended there [at the Privy Council], he was dressed in a suit of Manchester velvet; and Silas Deane told me that, when they met in Paris to sign the treaty [treaties] between France and America, he purposely put on that suit."

Dr. Bancroft, as reported by William Temple Franklin, Dr. Franklin's grandson, says, in speaking of the same occasion,—

"The Doctor was dressed in a full dress suit of spotted Manchester velvet, and stood *conspicuously erect*, without the smallest movement of any part of his body."

These two eye-witnesses of the scene at the Privy Council therefore describe in general terms the character of the stuff of the dress worn by Franklin on that occasion. But, besides that, one of them, Dr. Priestley, it will have been observed, cites Silas Deane, a fellow-commissioner of Franklin's in France, as having told him that the Doctor had purposely worn the same suit when, later, the treaties between America and France were signed; and more than that, again, the other, Dr. Bancroft, who was himself present on both occasions, informs William Temple Franklin, as will presently appear, as to the conclusion drawn by himself personally with reference to Franklin's latent intention in wearing the costume on the second occasion. The follow-

ing account of Dr. Bancroft to William Temple Franklin is therefore trebly conclusive, as representing his own personal observation, and as confirming not only the observation of Dr. Priestley with reference to the particular dress at the Privy Council, but also that of Mr. Deane with reference to the dress and the significance of wearing it at the signing of the treaties with France.

"It is a fact that he [Franklin], as Dr. Priestley mentions, signed the treaties of commerce and eventual alliance with France in the clothes which he had worn at the Cockpit, when the preceding transaction occurred [the meeting of the Privy Council]. It had been intended, you may recollect [Dr. Bancroft is informing William Temple Franklin], that these treaties should be signed on the evening of Thursday, the 5th of February; and when Dr. Franklin had dressed himself for the day, I observed that he wore the suit in question; which I thought the more extraordinary, as it had been laid aside for many months. This I noticed to Mr. Deane, and soon after, when a messenger came from Versailles, with a letter from Mr. Gérard, the French plenipotentiary, stating that he was so unwell from a cold, that he wished to defer coming to Paris to sign the treaties, until the next evening, I said to Mr. Deane, 'Let us see whether the Doctor will wear the same suit of clothes to-morrow; if he does, I shall suspect that he is influenced by a recollection of the treatment which he received at the Cockpit.' The morrow came, and the same clothes were again worn, and the treaties signed. After which these clothes were laid aside, and so far as my knowledge extends, never worn afterwards. I once intimated to Dr. Franklin the suspicion which his wearing these clothes on that occasion had excited in my mind, when he smiled without telling me whether it was well or ill founded. I have heard him sometimes say, that he was not insensible to injuries, but that he never put himself to any trouble or inconvenience to retaliate."

The two occasions to be considered, therefore, indubitably are, first, that of the assault, in 1774, upon Franklin before the Privy Council; and, second, that of the simultaneous signing, in 1778, of the two treaties between America and France after the beginning of the Revolutionary War. Yet the following quotation by Mr. Sparks from a letter to the English *Gentleman's Magazine* of July, 1785, written by a Mr. Whitefoord, shows that many persons then took, as others still do, the second notable occasion when Franklin

wore the dress to have been, not that of the signing of the treaties between America and France, but that of the subsequent signing of the treaty of peace between America and Great Britain. As Mr. Whitefoord was seeking solely to refute the statement of persons who imagined that the second occasion was that of the signing of the treaty of peace between America and Great Britain, and as he himself had been, as a secretary, one of the witnesses to that very treaty, he could speak with confidence as to the particular point that he maintained, unaware, as his letter shows, of what had led to popular misapprehension on the subject. As his statement kept strictly to the point before him, it is not surprising that it lacks complete elucidation of the subject. It is surprising, however, that Mr. Sparks, one of the most conscientious, accurate, and able of biographers, should have allowed to creep into his "Works of Franklin" this contradiction by Mr. Whitefoord of a popular error, without coupling with it the statement that, although Mr. Whitefoord was correct in denying that Franklin wore the dress in question on the occasion of signing the treaty of peace between America and Great Britain, he had thereby innocently left the impression that the occurrence of Franklin's significantly wearing a certain dress at a treaty-signing never took place at all.

The following is the note by Mr. Sparks, introducing the passage referred to from the *Gentleman's Magazine*:

"Lord Brougham, in his sketch of the character of Mr. Wedderburn, afterwards Lord Loughborough, recently published, has unguardedly repeated a false report respecting the signing of the treaty, which was circulated soon after that event, but promptly refuted. In alluding to Mr. Wedderburn's abusive speech against Dr. Franklin before the Privy Council, Lord Brougham says, 'It is well known that, when the ambassadors were met to sign the peace of Versailles, by which the independence of America was acknowledged, Franklin retired, in order to change his dress and affix his name to the treaty in those garments which he wore when attending the Privy Council, and which he had kept by him for the purpose many years.' This statement is entirely erroneous. The report was fabricated in England at a time when the treaty was the topic of vehement discussion; and it was eagerly seized upon to gratify the malevolence of a disappointed party. When it appeared in print, it was

immediately contradicted by Mr. Whitefoord, who was present at the signing of the treaty, and affixed his name to it as the secretary of the English commissioner. ‘This absurd story,’ says Mr. Whitefoord, ‘has no foundation but in the imagination of the inventor. He supposes that the act of signing the peace took place at the house of Dr. Franklin [at Passy, near Paris]. The fact is otherwise; the conferences were held, and the treaty was signed, at the hotel of the British commissioner, where Dr. Franklin and the other American commissioners gave their attendance for that purpose. The court of Versailles having at that time gone into mourning for the death of some German prince, the Doctor, of course, was dressed in a suit of *black cloth*; and it is in the recollection of the writer of this, and also he believes of many other people, that when the memorable philippic was pronounced against Dr. Franklin, in the Privy Council, he was dressed in a suit of *figured Manchester velvet*.’”

Mr. Sparks, I say, overlooked the fact that this note, in his first volume¹ of the “Works of Franklin,” is, through default of comment by him, incongruous with the main text in his fourth volume.² The omission in the note involves the injustice to himself of the implication that he was unaware of the facts of the case, whereas the facts of the case, in the proceedings before the Privy Council and all matter relevant to the subsequent French treaty, are elaborately set forth by him. His account proves that what has sometimes been erroneously represented as happening at one of the two treaty-signings, really happened at the other. The second signal occasion on which Franklin appeared in the dress under consideration was, as Mr. Sparks himself describes it, when he signed the treaties of commerce and alliance between America and France, not when he signed the treaty of peace with Great Britain. Clearly, the report of Franklin’s having worn that dress when he signed the treaty of peace with Great Britain must have grown out of reports of Franklin’s action when the treaties with France were signed.

The pieces of cloth believed to have belonged to the coat of this suit (for tradition says nothing of small-clothes to correspond) were divided many years ago among some of

¹ Vol. I. p. 488.

² Vol. IV. pp. 441 to 455, both inclusive.

Franklin's descendants. They would seem, without doubt, to represent pieces of the coat described by the three persons already cited; the same as also described by Madame Campan, as of "brown cloth," the same mentioned by Madame du Deffand as "*mordoré* [reddish-brown] velvet." These descriptions of it tally in a general way with those of Dr. Priestley, Dr. Bancroft, and Mr. Whitefoord, in describing the dress as made of "Manchester velvet, spotted Manchester velvet, and figured Manchester velvet." The descriptions of Mesdames Campan and du Deffand, however, introduce the idea of color, which those gentlemen do not mention. A lady who has lately looked at a piece of the cloth reputed to have belonged to the coat describes it to me as "a sort of red-brown corduroy."

It only remains, then, in order to avoid assuming here that the pieces of cloth extant are actually portions of the coat worn by Franklin on the two memorable occasions mentioned, to summarize the evidence pointing to the fact that they are really such. First of all, family tradition, over the brief space of only five generations, can hardly be at fault in so regarding them. Then, again, the character of the stuff of the pieces, the largest of which now lies before me, accords with the previous description of Franklin's dress by the persons of his time. That character is resolvable into the appearance covered by the terms "corduroy, velvet, reddish-brown." The face of the piece before me exhibits parallel lines of a reddish-brown, fluffy, corduroy-like ribbing laid upon a heavy, rich background of golden lustre. These lines of velvet pile being just an eighth of an inch in width, and the golden hue of the background showing between them to a width of only half that, the general effect of the fabric is of a rich reddish-brown, relieved from sombreness by the delicate golden background. The stuff certainly is not, as Dr. Bancroft described the dress to be, "spotted." But, excluding the idea of "spotted" as overwhelmingly discredited by the mass of other testimony, we still have his statement that it was of "Manchester velvet," and the testimony of all the

other observers cited accords exactly with the appearance of this stuff which tradition ascribes as portions of the dress. It would seem conclusive, therefore, from this present, compared with the past, ocular evidence, confirmed by tradition, that the pieces of cloth described are portions of the veritable dress in which Franklin stood before the Privy Council, and in which he also assisted in signing the treaties which meant Great Britain's declaration of war against France for having become the ally of the United States in her struggle for independence and final triumph by force of arms.

Mr. Whitefoord's letter to the *Gentleman's Magazine* clearly brings out and refutes the charge against Franklin, that he had not only worn the suit described at the signing of the treaty of peace between America and Great Britain, but that he had, in so doing, coincidentally made remarks expressive of the significance of his action. Hence his letter is headed, "*Vindication of Dr. Franklin from a charge against him.*" After two short introductory paragraphs, he goes on to speak, as follows, of what shows the prevalence of the false report regarding Franklin :

"This absurd story has no foundation but in the imagination of the inventor. Until I saw your correspondent's letter, I did not know that the story had already appeared in print. It is true, indeed, that I have frequently heard it repeated in conversation, and have always treated it with the contempt that it deserved; but your correspondent, '*A Briton*' (whose abilities as a writer I respect), has by admitting it into his letter, given it a degree of consequence to which it is not otherwise entitled. From my opinion of him as a man, I am also disposed to believe that he will not persist in circulating a falsehood, knowing it to be such."

Then come two paragraphs describing Mr. Whitefoord's relations to the signing of the treaty, and denying that Dr. Franklin had changed his dress on that occasion or uttered words attributed to him. The letter then concludes with the passage quoted by Mr. Sparks.

The prevalent misapprehension at the time in England, that Franklin had signalized the triumph of his country's cause, at the signing of the treaty of peace with Great

Britain, by wearing the dress there in which he had been insulted before the Lords in Council, showed public ignorance of the character of the man. When the dogs of war had been slipped, despite his strenuous efforts for peace, he was ready, as he proved himself to be, to go all honorable lengths in the prosecution of the war to advantage. He had even, in his philosophic way, breathed quiet defiance to the enemy at the treaties with France, by wearing the very dress identified in his mind with one of the culminating events of which the sequel was war. But the war ended, the treaty with Great Britain to be signed, his thoughts at once reverted to the pleasantness of the paths of enduring peace. His letters of the time prove the fact alleged. He had many friends in England, and soon after the treaty with her was signed he longed to see them once more, and especially Mrs. William Hewson and her mother, Mrs. Stevenson, who were the dearest of them all. Accordingly he promptly wrote to Mrs. Hewson of his desire to cross the Channel to meet the family, to which he also had become endeared. But, upon second thoughts, he concluded that it were best to postpone his visit, lest his appearance then in England might be attributed to his wish to triumph over a discomfited opponent. A letter of his, of January 27, 1783, to Mrs. Hewson, so clearly portrays his feelings, not only for his friends, but for the whole English people, that I cannot do better than conclude with it as bearing upon the whole previous discussion, through his sentiments at the time, and upon his whole affectionate nature.

"PASSEY, 27 January, 1783.

" . . . The departure of my dearest friend,¹ which I learn from your last letter, greatly affects me. To meet with her once more in this life was one of the principal motives of my proposing to visit England again before my return to America. The last year carried off my friends Dr. Pringle, Dr. Fothergill, Lord Kames, and Lord le Despencer. This has begun to take away the rest, and strikes the hardest. Thus the ties I had to that country, and indeed to the world in general, are loosened one by one, and I shall soon have no attachment left to make me unwilling to follow.

¹ The death of Mrs. Stevenson, the mother of Mrs. Hewson.

"I intended writing when I sent the eleven books, but I lost the time in looking for the twelfth. I wrote with that; and hope it came to hand. I therein asked your counsel about my coming to England. On reflection, I think I can, from my knowledge of your prudence, foresee what it will be, viz., not to come too soon, lest it should seem braving and insulting some who ought to be respected. I shall, therefore, omit that journey till I am near going to America, and then just step over to take leave of my friends, and spend a few days with you. I propose bringing Ben with me, and perhaps may leave him under your care.¹

"At length we are at peace, God be praised, and long, very long, may it continue. All wars are follies, very expensive, and very mischievous ones. When will mankind be convinced of this, and agree to settle their differences by arbitration? Were they to do it, even by the cast of a die, it would be better than by fighting and destroying each other.

"Spring is coming on, when travelling will be delightful. Can you not, when you see your children all at school, make a little party, and take a trip hither? I have now a large house, delightfully situated, in which I could accommodate you and two or three friends, and I am but half an hour's drive from Paris.

"In looking forward, twenty-five years seem a long period, but, in looking back, how short! Could you imagine, that it is now full a quarter of a century since we were first acquainted? It was in 1757. During the greatest part of the time, I lived in the house with my dear deceased friend, your mother; of course you and I conversed with each other much and often. It is to all our honors, that in all that time we never had among us the smallest misunderstanding. Our friendship has been all clear sunshine, without the least cloud in its hemisphere. Let me conclude by saying to you, what I have had too frequent occasions to say to my other remaining old friends, 'The fewer we become, the more let us love one another.' Adieu, and believe me ever, yours most affectionately,

"B. FRANKLIN."

Franklin's mental attitude, thus revealed by himself, proves it to have been impossible that, at the signing of the treaty of peace, or at any subsequent period, he could have harbored even a thought of exulting over a defeated and kindred people.

¹ The visit, in the meaning in Franklin's mind, never took place. On the contrary, as it turned out, Mrs. Hewson, with her family, paid a visit to him at Passy the winter before his departure from France. Franklin stopped at Southampton for a few hours on his way to America. The "Ben" of whom he speaks was his grandson, Benjamin Franklin Bache.



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